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2017

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*You can have what I have now, If you really believe it*

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*You can have what I have now, If you really believe it*

by

**Alicia Lorraine Link, BFA**

**Report**

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The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

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## **Dedication**

To my mother, Malgorzata Borowska Link, the strongest woman I know.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am immensely grateful to my peers who extended their emotional support when I needed it most.

I would like to thank my graduate committee members: John Yancey, Kristin Lucas, Nicole Awai, Michael Smith, Ann Reynolds, and Teresa Hubbard for their critique, support, and patience over the past two years.

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## **Abstract**

*You can have what I have now, If you really believe it*

Alicia Lorraine Link, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Kristin Lucas

This report is an amalgamation of anecdotes, quotations, conversations, and contextualization related to the work I make in the studio. My work features characters and narratives that invite empathy while serving as proxies for anxiety and personal desire. Like the narratives in my work, the following writing is nonlinear. Embrace the meandering.

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## *MENU*

<i>EMPATHY</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>NARRATIVE</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>PAINT</i>	<i>P</i>
<i>COLOR</i>	<i>C</i>
<i>REALITY</i>	<i>R</i>
<i>FANTASY</i>	<i>F</i>
<i>THEATER/ DRAMA</i>	<i>Th</i>
<i>PUPPETS</i>	<i>Pu</i>
<i>LIFE</i>	<i>L</i>
<i>DEATH</i>	<i>D</i>
<i>PLAY</i>	<i>Pl</i>
<i>TRANSFORMATION</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>WATER</i>	<i>W</i>
<i>AMBIGUITY</i>	<i>A</i>

**Figure 1: Menu of Terms**



## 1.NRFAE

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In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder...

Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure.<sup>1</sup>

My work embodies sentiments of affection, humor, cynicism, and melancholy generated from my lived experiences.



**Figure 2: *Traveling Across Middle America***

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (n.p.: Hogarth Press,

## 2. NRFALDT

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*But behind the office exists an alternate space, an alternate world*

*Barbeque, corn, watermelon  
Plenty of beer for the adults and even the “mature” teens.  
It was large, rectangular, aqua  
Cluttered with leaves  
from the trees above*

*Jumping in, the pool felt cold  
Even in the heat of July  
Never enough sunlight to become tepid  
You did not mind.*

*It was probably a warning.  
The pool house vandalized  
A deer trying to sip  
falls in and drowns*

*Eventually the pool became toxic.  
Everything that touched it  
Or came near it transformed*

*The pool remains  
The fallen leaves  
And the deer  
A putrid, soupy disaster.*

### 3. ENRFLD

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In Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*, she writes about the challenges and adventures of storytelling by taking us through her experiences dealing with her mother's dementia as well as personal experiences with disease. Later, she draws parallels between the effect and affect of environmental setting as seen in the classic novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Early on she poses this to the reader:

What's your story? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice. To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or to figure out how to tell yourself their story.

Which means that a place is a story, and stories are *geography*, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller's art, and then a way of travelling from here to there.<sup>2</sup>

In my own work, I am interested in how to tell a story not only through characters, but through a pictorial and sometimes physical environment. The figures are often endangered by their environment or setting. Like Solnit, I think about empathy as a tool to entice a viewer to stay with the work. Because narratives are often ambiguous or incomplete, my work complicates expectations of a traditional narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (n.p.: Penguin Books, 2014), [Page 20].



Figure 3: *Lethargy*

#### 4.ENRFLDPI

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*This place possessed the same potential for fun as a college dormitory: close proximity to friends and lovers, a home away from family, communal meal times, and organized activities. Minus the binge drinking, the residents had many resources (and pharmaceuticals!) at their disposal. Given all this, the charm stopped there. Regardless, institutions facilitating the decay of the body and mind generated the following cast of characters.*

Fiorella had one leg and half her body was paralyzed. Confined to a wheelchair Fiorella managed to get around. Originally from Spain, her accent combined with her slurred speech made it difficult to understand what she was saying. Most of the time, she was begging for someone to take her out for a cigarette. There was a time she was allowed to wheel herself out for that sweet nicotine fix, but after an incident with a steep incline, she was restricted by whomever was available to wheel her outside. While outdoors, she would engage in casual conversation as she would press you to allow her to have just one more smoke.

Adrianna, a proud Italian American woman who looked like a witch, was in the Alzheimer's unit. She, too, was confined to a wheelchair and spent a lot of her time singing

♪ *when the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie!* ♪

Short tempered, she would finish singing and her eyes would begin to bulge. Suddenly, she would start screaming at someone for bumping into her or force feeding her nutrient dense pudding with coffee. Crusted and caked on food lived under her fingernails and *That's Amore* lived in her heart.

Alberto did not say much. Mostly, he would grunt and eat. In his wheelchair, he could spend all day sitting in one spot surveying the room full of potential victims. When he did manage to get close enough, usually to a woman that was nearly comatose, his hands would wander up her blouse or his tongue would thrust into her mouth. Maybe he was a predator or perhaps his mind temporarily failed him into thinking these women were ex-lovers or wives.

Frank's head tilted forward and his clothes hung loosely over his withering body. Often without shoes on, his large red crusty feet would drag his body in his wheelchair towards you to ask a question. *Will you take me home? I have to get back to my horses.* His life before monotony was dedicated to a large plot of land in South Jersey with stables and a kidney bean shaped pool. Once his request to go home was rejected his head would hang just like a horse as he proceeded to use his crusty feet to drag himself in front of the television to watch *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

Caroline Fox stood five feet tall and weighed about ninety pounds. Deceptively small and sweet looking, she was the definition of incorrigible. A pleasant dinner could quickly turn into a hostage situation with the nurse being the hostage and Fox holding the dinner knife to their throat. Although the dosage of her sedatives were constantly being adjusted, Fox's days in the home



were coming to an end. One day she was beating a cadaverous woman's head against the wall, and the next day she was gone. Supposedly, she moved to the home for *troubled* geriatrics.

Susan appeared way more cognizant of reality than the rest of them--or so it seemed. A religious woman, Susan went to the church annex every Sunday. She was mobile, which preserved the little independence one could have in a place like this. Bingo games with the other residents became another weekly thrill. Perhaps coping meant maintaining routine and ignoring the fact that her husband lived in another unit down the hall and had no memory of her existence.

Peg spent her days reclining on a gurney holding a large stuffed purple rabbit. She mostly spoke in sentence fragments and gibberish. Unable to feed herself, dress herself, or walk, she required a lot of assistance. Except when it concerned one thing. Peg was often seen in her gurney with one arm around her stuffed animal and another down the front of her diaper.

Diane didn't live in the home. She was only a visitor. Every day she would bring her Shih Tzu Petunia, a registered therapy dog, to visit her dazed husband suffering from dementia. She was all smiles as she entered the rancid smelling wing of the institution. Generally, Diane was well liked by staff and residents. Refreshing as it was to see a chipper expression, lately, something about her demeanor felt slightly more sinister. Turns out, a few days prior, driving back from visiting her husband, Diane was tending to Petunia's incessant need for attention. When, in that brief moment of distraction, the car thumped. What

seemed to be an unusually lumpy speed bump, turned out to be the body of a sixteen year old boy riding his bike home from a friend's house.



Figure 4: *Kick it Around*





**Figure 5:** *Deer Soup with Down Comforter*



**Figure 6:** *Headgear Self-Portrait*

## 5.ENPCRFPITWA

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*I used to start a painting with a literal setting or interpretation of a lived experience. Until, I made the shift in subject from deer to Headgear...*

*The first manifestation of this thought occurred when I drew a picture of headgear on the beach. Headgear, for those of you who don't know, is an obnoxious orthodontic device that adjusts the dreaded overbite. After doing this drawing, I decided to make another as a portrait of my twin brother, who also had to wear this thing after school. He named his "Edgar."*

*At this moment, the paintings became less about memory and more about invention.*

*During studio visits, people would ask what is it: a tooth, a rabbit's foot, a sad mattress, lady lumps, a penis, a bucket, toast, a ham sandwich, a medical device, tongues, an older man's face, a fountain...a butter churner?*

These paintings depict a space that is in between. The characters are in between reality and fantasy, past and present, abstraction and representation, male and female, solid and transparent, functional and dysfunctional. My work is serving this perpetual character development.

Painting possesses possibility. These paintings suggest and perhaps offer a multiplicity of interpretation and affect. Regardless of what these figurative elements may refer to, in my work they serve as a stand in for a body. The unnameability of these amorphous forms creates distance with reality and associations with specific gender, race, class, and status. In an interview between

artist Stanya Kahn and Trinie Dalton, the term “abjection” is discussed similarly to the way I think about my amorphous forms and storytelling. In a conversation about abjection, Kahn says:

The kind of consciousness and action and psychic material that happens in dreams is in between kinds of consciousness, similar to the ways that Kristeva talks about the abject being neither subject nor object... It's a radical space, a slippery space, and I also like how she almost anthropomorphizes this notion of the abject where it becomes a wily creature that is both rebellious and persistent.<sup>3</sup>

The “creatures” or bodies, in my work, appear to be transforming, slumping, hugging, leaking, barfing, and physically responding to a range of emotional stimuli.

The work relies on two characters including: a character that exists outdoors in a world going on adventures and a character that resembles a self-conscious performer. The adventurous character appears in different scenarios and in various states of corporeality. Decisions and ideas for these scenarios are usually generated through process and reflection of each painting. The outdoor character might start as a rigid armature and in the next painting it might become fleshy or “chubby”. The performer is repeated centrally, on a platform or a stage, with a spotlight shape surrounding it each time. This character's fixed position on the canvas emphasizes a sense of pressure and subsequent failure. Repetition and transitions of the forms intensifies their affect.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanya Kahn and Trinie Dalton, "GO WITH THE (UNREGULATED) FLOW Fluidity, Abjection, and Abstraction," in *Abstract Video: The Moving Image in Contemporary Art*, ed. Gabrielle Jennings (n.p.: University of California, 2015), [Page 205].

The relationship between individual paintings, drawings, and prints is becoming increasingly important to a larger narrative of the work. The narrative happening between two or more paintings in the same room is more complex and *perhaps* more complete than seeing the painting in isolation. The lean or bend of a figure might start to lean or bend into another painting. Ultimately, the mediation between the idea, the paint handling, and the final image results in a tension within the work.

The process of painting and creating an image becomes this intensely personal psychological experience: a struggle, an urgency, and a mediation. Fleshing out a character for the goal of creating a larger narrative involves play, projection, and fantasy. *Should it be receptive to the spotlight? Should it bend and dip in the water?* Again, like Kahn, I think the (non-linear) narrative in my work as an access point. She says:

I thought about narrative as a way in, ways in which you can take story, whether it's in the fictional sense, or the Grand Narrative, or Histories, and social sciences and you can pack as much of that information as you can in one image, or symbol. Everything has to carry some load of meaning but also there might be an image or sound that doesn't particularly tell a discreet or legible story or offer a piece of information. It might just perform, on a visceral, energetic, or symbolic level. I also wonder if it's abject to maul the traditional story by combining the scripted from the improvised. I don't work in a traditional story space; I don't make a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>4</sup>

When I refer to affect, I am thinking about how an image or object can “perform on a visceral level.” Since Kahn works in video she uses the terms scripted and

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<sup>4</sup> Kahn and Dalton, "GO WITH," [Page 208].

improvised, but I would use the terms intuitive versus planned. My process in the studio is extremely fluid, working on several pieces at once and switching back and forth between painting, drawing, and print. Glazing, mark making, scraping, patterning, are useful and result in luminous depth or redirection to surface. This results in a back and forth between image and paint. Although at times application of paint seems clunky, awkward, and uncomfortable, this ultimately reinforces the integrity of these characters.



**Figure 7:** *Soft and Drippy*



**Figure 8:** *Hugging Headgears*





**Figure 9:** *Still image from “Welcome to Me”*

The film *Welcome to Me* written by Eliot Laurence and directed by Shira Piven tells the story of a young woman named Alice Kleig, played by Kristin Wiig, suffering from borderline personality disorder, who wins eighty-six million dollars in the “California Stacks Sweepstakes.” As a character, Alice has no boundaries, no filter, and no impulse control. Her main interests include: animals, veterinary medicine, maintaining a low glycemic/ high protein diet, swan tchotchkes, the camera’s gaze, and *Oprah* (the talk show). After earning her winnings, she decides to go off disability from the state of California and cease all treatment for her illness including: therapy and medication. She immediately relocates to a hotel room in a casino with her newly adopted dog *Godzilla* and more swan tchotchkes. Her family, ex-husband, and best friend are, understandably, concerned about Alice, and her capacity for reasonable decision

making, given her new acquisition. Later, Alice attends a screening of an infomercial called “Live Alchemy” where she captures the camera’s gaze even as a member of the studio audience. She quickly co-opts the whole program and begins to talk about herself, her winnings, and her masturbation habits. The “New Vibrance Network” owner Rich Ruskin sees potential in her manic charm as a way to save his failing network and business. With her seemingly immeasurable funds, Alice is able to host a show *just like Oprah* called “Welcome to Me.” Although the show is utterly self-indulgent, campy, and a times a cathartic replacement for her therapy sessions, I see a correlation between her fantasy, the perfect talk show, and her reality, her disease, in relationship to the work I make in the studio.



**Figure 10: *Drain Drama***



Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects about this dark comedy is Alice's ability to dream big even though her body and mind are against her. Before she is on air for the first time the make-up artist says to Alice "Good Luck" and Alice replies by claiming she didn't really believe in luck, but offers this mantra: "you can have what I have now, if you really believe it." This phrase is interesting. She is completely earnest, but what does Alice *really* have?

### 1. Her Show:



**Figure 11: Still image from "Welcome to Me"**

Alice's show is an autobiographical talk show meets over-the-top infomercial meets the everyday. The show begins with her entrance on a swan boat to the theme song of a recording of her own voice singing. Each episode of the show is two hours long and contains curious segments such as: how to make a meatloaf cake, reenactments of childhood traumas, calling her mother and therapist without their knowledge of being on air. Potential future segments include: matching colors to emotions, to be a woman (song), I can still smell you, luck

foods, and you got everything, I got nothing. At first, the show is a success. Daytime television viewers are not compelled to change the channel after watching Alice scream at her childhood impersonators or bicycle across the stage. Eventually though, even her loyal fans can not endorse her most controversial segment yet: neutering her dog *Godzilla* as well as a two other dogs she adopted later on.

## 2. Mental Illness

After losing the support of fans and friends, Alice finally reaches her psychotic breaking point. She spends all day in her, at this point trashed, casino room with her recovering patients. Eventually she is hospitalized, after walking naked through a row of slot machines revealing the physical trauma of burns on her chest and clear mental instability.



Figure 12: Still from *"Welcome to Me"*

## 3. Failed Relationships

Obviously, her actions did not go without repercussions. Her best friend, Gina, had given up a friendship that was one sided. Her lover, and cameraman on her show, didn't appreciate her relationships with other men. Her therapist, and expert in dealing with people like Alice, feared any interaction with her even via the telephone.



**Figure 13: Still from *"Welcome to Me"***

Perhaps where the movie fails, for me, is the ending. The network agrees to allow Alice to host one final episode of "Welcome to Me" where she publically apologizes to all the people she hurt along the way to stardom. This ending seems to conclude too neatly. The whole film, the show, and Alice's antics functioned as an over the top drama/ dark-comedy and hovered in this place where fantasy met reality. Finally, the ending neutralized the complexity and messiness of the entire film into a patriarchal fantasy. The conclusion was also a complete contradiction to her character. Alice was once this strong-willed, free, creative woman and ended up being pacified and controlled.

## 7. ENRLDA

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My survival depended on mapping her landscape and finding my routes out of it. We are all the heroes of our own stories, and one of the arts of perspective is to see yourself small on the stage of another's story, to see the vast expanse of the world that is not about you, and to see your power, to make your life, to make others, or to break them, to tell stories rather than be told by them.<sup>5</sup>

My own experience with illness, like Solnit and like Alice, has shaped my work. My mother was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) right around the time I was accepted into graduate school. At the same time, her brother, died from a heart attack and my mother had to travel to her native country of Poland for a funeral. There, she received an unexpected diagnosis.

Seeking a second opinion from an American doctor, my mother signed papers at the hospital and was denied (necessary) treatment. She immediately checked into a hospital in Philadelphia. The doctors told my mother that the disease was advanced and checked her in for a month for an intensive round of chemo. Her treatments for the following year cause a series of physical and mental ups and downs. In the fall of 2015, she was officially in remission. We all believed she was cured and she had won.

In March 2016, without my knowledge, the leukemia returned. Again, she returned to the hospital for about a month for another round of chemotherapy. I did not discover she was sick until I received a text message of a picture with my

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<sup>5</sup> Solnit, *The Faraway*, [Page 29].

mother and my aunt both wearing wigs. *Did I mention my aunt also was diagnosed with Endometrial Cancer that year?* I was shocked, and frustrated, but surprisingly calm. My mother has beat this once before, I had no doubt that her body could take care of it once again.

In the summer of 2016, after searching national and international databases for a bone marrow donor, my mother's blood matched an anonymous European male in his 40s. She received the transplant, and as always, time would tell how her body responded.

Shortly after, I attended a residency at the Vermont Studio Center. Working with the headgear figure I was so familiar with, I was able to depict images of survival. The figures became proxies from my own emotional trauma as well as projections of my mother's trauma. The studio became a place where I could understand her disease, the limits of the body, and the capacity of narrative. In Solnit's accurate articulation she says that "sudden onset of serious illness changes the landscape profoundly."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Solnit, *The Faraway*, [Page 70].

## 8. ENLDRF

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*Good morning, Alicia!*

*This is Suzanne, your family's old friend. I know you've been in touch with Adrianna and am glad she's passed on news to you.*

*Getting straight to the two most important things: As you know, your mother's health is very fragile. The new treatment they are doing is holding the leukemia halfway at bay, but not beaten it back yet to any degree where she is truly out of danger. The situation is like a rickety old bridge with most of the timbers out: it might hold up for 100 more crossings or it could give out any time. Absolute best case scenario with everything going perfect she could get 2 years. But my oncology friend said it's possible she might not make it to Christmas. I did not tell her that, because there's no point: why scare her, and what would it change? She already knows her time is limited, better than we all do; she's not been in denial. She's going day-to-day right now and trying to enjoy the good things that come her way, without any ambition of trying suddenly to come up with some fancy bucket list of things to accomplish....*

*I am going to continue as a second text*

*Let me know what you think of this plan. You can text or call me at this number. Then, at some point after you get tickets, I'll call you to be sure you got the check and to see if you have any specific questions about your mom's medical condition.*

*Hang in there. I'm done texting.*





Figure 14: *Blood Bag with Arm*

## 9. ENPCRFTThPuLFPIWA

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Feelings are kept alive that would fade away without narrative, or are invented by narratives that may have little to do with what once transpired and even less to do with the present moment.<sup>7</sup>

The reappearance of characters from one work to the next creates familiarity and furthers plotlines, as the intuitive installation space becomes a theatrical stage where action and drama occurs. Puppet-like objects appear separately and jointly with paintings presenting a metaphor for life and death.

Jovial imagery and craft materials remain superficial while masking and delaying precarious situations. Color is deliberately lively and toxic. Fluorescent yellow hues, mint greens, and luminous pinks seem pleasant and cheerful, but contradict the image of a body drowning, being crushed or in imminent danger.



**Figure 15: *Journey's End with Pink Ball***

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<sup>7</sup> Solnit, *The Faraway*, [Page 22].



## 10. ENRFThPuLFPIA

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*Figure 16: Adult Swim detail*

Puppets serve as an embodiment of suffering, but, as mentioned before, a proxy for my emotion. I prefer to use the term *puppet* rather than sculpture or doll based on my research into the exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia called “The Puppet Show.” In the catalog various authors, including curator Ingrid Schaffner and writer/playwright Jane Taylor, write about the theory and the power behind puppets. Schaffner defines puppets as the following: “to distinguish puppets from, say, dolls, the notion of a stage asserts itself as a signifier. Without some sign of an audience, there is no show,

only private play.”<sup>8</sup> In my own work, the viewer plays the role as audience, and large scale paintings appear as backdrops that set the “stage.”

Because puppets have a potential for action, I am interested in the tension my work inherently possesses. I do not active them. I do not perform. As a result, there is an unfulfilled expectation that furthers the pathos present in these kind of crappy papier-mache objects. Not to mention the inherent metaphor:

The art of bringing dead things to life is how Kiki Smith, who was once a busker with a with a Punch and Judy show, relates her work as a sculptor to puppetry.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 17:** *Figure (wearing a hat) on Floating Dock*

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<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Schaffer, "Preamble and Precipice: an atomic introduction to 'The Puppet Show'" in *The Puppet Show*, ed. Neil McClister (Philadelphia, PA: Institute of Contemporary Art University of Pennsylvania, 2008), [Page 15].

<sup>9</sup> Schaffner, "Dead, Drunk," [Page 23].

## 11. ENCRFA

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*Looks terrific but now we are into spring. I miss your company. Days are nice and we could be doing things together. Since I sit in an empty house all day the fun is limited. I planted a couple of pansies by the walkway. They are pretty blue. Little living color elevated my mood.*

*-Text from Mom*





**Figure 18: Altarpiece**

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